

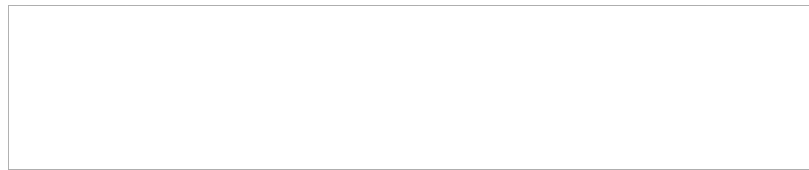
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The Breakthrough on the Don by the troops of the South-Western Front and the action in the operational depth.

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The Breakthrough on the Don

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THE BREAKTHROUGH ON THE DON by the troops of the south-western front and the action in the operational depth.

The attack by the south-western front on the Don in December, 1942, can be divided into three rough phases: (1) The Breakthrough, (2) The Pursuit, and (3) The Completion of the Operation and the Securing of the Success.

The first phase included the period from the 16th. to the 17th. of December. During these days the troops, after fierce fighting, were able to break through the main line of the enemy defensive position and entered in to the operational phase of the battle.

The second phase began on the 18-19th. December during the continuation of the first phase and lasted to about the 25-27th. December. In this period the destruction of the main forces of the 8th. Italian and 3rd. Romanian Divisions was achieved and the troops reached the boundary of the area which the plan had envisioned to secure.

The completion of the 3rd. phase occurred in the last days of December and the first days of January, 1943. It was characterized by intermittent fighting with the enemy's reserves and concluded in the completion of all the tasks set by the command.

The present paper has as its aim to show the general progress of the operation and its result, concentrating mainly on the first and second phases of the battle. A detailed analysis of the concluding phase is not worthwhile, but is reflected in the summary.

THE BREAKTHROUGH

Despite heavy fog the troops of the left wing of the Voronezh and south-western front attacked on the morning of the 16th. of December beginning with an artillery barrage at the appointed time. At eight o'clock the first massive air strike was delivered on the enemy. A ninety minute barrage of all the available weapons was delivered on the front line and then the infantry attacked.

Bitter fighting began in the forward areas of the enemy's defended zone, particularly in the direction of the main thrusts.

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The Breakthrough of the 1st. Guards Army to Bogunchar (see Sketch 1)

By first light on the 16th. December the main force of the 1st. Guards Army was concentrated on the front Derezhovka-Dhuravka. In this narrow sector, 18 km in depth, along the left shore of the river Don, in the Osetrovskiy bend, were concentrated three quarters of all the rifle units of an army, and a whole tank corps.

At 9.30, after the artillery preparation, the infantry attacked. The battle became fierce right from the beginning. Despite our strong artillery preparation, many of the enemy strong points remained intact and the enemy opened fire on the attacking units. At the same time the Italian and German forces mounted a counter-attack with tanks in an attempt to cut off our infantry from its starting position. The 41st. and 44th. Guards Rifle Divisions, operating in the center of the army's thrust, suffered particularly heavily.

In the middle of the day, units of the 195th. Rifle Division were able to break through the first line of defence on the northern edge of heights 153.1, 155, as well as on the western edge of height 197.0. The 6th. Guards Rifle Corps, encountering heavy enemy fire from heights 197.0 and 217.2, as well as from the woods north of Bolontsey, made hardly any progress on its right flank and in the center. The attack on the left flank was not much more successful. There the 1st. Rifle Division, advanced under heavy fire, passed over the obstacles which had been constructed in the dense forest, and was able to penetrate the enemy defences for several hundred meters in the direction of Svinukla and height ~~196.0~~ 196.0.

Since the enemy defences were not penetrated as fast as was expected, and since it was imperative that the breakthrough be accomplished quickly, the army commander decided to support the infantry attack with units of the tank corps.

At eleven o'clock the 25th. and 18th. Tank Corps started on their missions. A half hour later the 17th. Tank Corps of the 6th Army also left its departure position. The heading units of these Tank Corps encountered a mine field as they approached height 197.0.

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and the northern rise of height 217.2. It was impossible to bypass these fields and the corps was forced to discontinue their attack in order to clear paths through the minefields.

Towards the end of the day units of the 195th. Rifle Division, on the right flank, approached height 204.1, and on the left, continued the fight for the approaches of rasno-Orekhovoye. Units of the 1st. Rifle Division, during that time, forced the enemy out of Svinynkhi and Filonov and surrounded Solomtsa. It was not possible to secure the success which had been achieved, a little later the enemy counter-attacked with two infantry regiments supported by tanks and our units had to withdraw from Filipovo into the area of height 196.0.

In summing up the first day of the battle, it can be said that despite the fact that the enemy's forward line of defence had been seriously dented, and his system of fire positions had been damaged, the aim of the battle which had been the deep penetration of the first line of defence had not been achieved.

The tasks set had not been fulfilled because of the following reasons.

The heavy fog during the artillery preparation prevented observation and many of the fire positions were not subdued. The infantry, therefore, was unable to breakthrough the line in the area of height 197.0, and the tanks failed to do so there as well.

Furthermore, since the tanks did not participate in the first infantry attack, the infantry, lacking tank support, did not succeed. That is another reason for the failure of the attack.

Another factor was that the air force was not able to support the attack, due to the weather, and this also affected the action of the ground troops.

As far as the location of the battle was concerned, the exploitation of the success had been envisioned on a narrow front from the Osetrovsky bend. Insufficiently deep reconnaissance of the forward defended area by the reconnaissance elements of the infantry and the

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armored troops resulted in the tanks running into a minefield through which paths had to be cleared during the battle.

These conditions prevented the breakthrough of the enemy defended area.

The Front and Army Command required of the troops that they do not discontinue the fight, that they find passages through the minefields during the night in order that, at first light on the 16th. of December, a determined attack by the main forces of the rifle and tank units could achieve the destruction of the enemy and the task set for the first day be completed.

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During the night of the 17th. of December, the large rifle units of the army and the motorized Rifle Brigades of the Tank Corps dislodged the enemy from a number of defended points, occupied Krasno-Orekhovaya and Solentsy, repulsed a counter-attack, and with their leading units, on the right flank, reached the Sovkhoz Bogucharka. In the center the enemy continued his stubborn defence in the area of heights 197.0 and 217.2.

The 25th. Tank Corps, having during the night cleared passages through the minefields, opened an attack on height 197.0 at 3 o'clock on the 17th. of December, and overcoming enemy resistance, proceeded to attack Gadyuche.

Operating from well-constructed defended points Gadyuche, Filinovo, and Pereshchepnoye, the Italian and German soldiers tried to stem our advance during the first part of the day with many counterattacks by troops of the second echelon. But the resistance of the 3rd. Italian Infantry Division "Ravenna" was broken and it withdrew to the south, leaving the flank and the rear of the 298th. Infantry Division exposed. The Italian Commander, in an attempt to correct this situation, threw in various units of black shirts, but without success.

During the second half of the day, our infantry in cooperation with the tanks, broke the resistance of the Italian troops on height 217.2, Gadyuche, and Filinovo and continued with a determined pur-

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suit in the direction of Tverdokhlebo and Boguchar.

Towards the end of the day the striking force of the army had reached, on the right flank, height 138.0, and the southern defences of Tverdokhlebo. In the center they were fighting for Vervekovka, on the left flank Pereshchepnoye had been taken and fighting was going on for Ol'khovyy and Grushevo.

The Tank Corps had been equally successful. The 25th. Tank Corps reached Tverdokhlebo, units of the 18th. Tank Corps, together with the 44th. Guards Rifle Division, were fighting for Vervekovka, the 24th. Tank Corps which had been in the 2nd. Echelon on the 17th. of December, crossed the river Don in the area of Verkh. amon and moved quickly to the river Bogucharka. The enemy, having entrenched himself in settled localities, put up a stubborn defence.

While withdrawing, the enemy had demolished the bridge across the river Bogucharka which at that time was not yet frozen. Under enemy fire and air attack, a bridge had ^{been} ~~16/16~~ laid by night and by 4 o'clock on the 18th. of December the 25th. Tank Corps, having its leading units in the area of Barsuki, started to cross to the southern shore of the river. Following it, the 24th. Tank Corps crossed.

With first light on the 18th. of December fighting started again on all sectors of the front. The right-flanking formations repulsed a counter-attack, supported by tanks and aircraft, forced the river Bogucharka, and captured Dantsevka, Krasnodar and Raskovka in the middle of the day. Now since the last defensive zone had been penetrated, the speed of our advance increased considerably.

Units of the 4th. Guards Rifle ~~Corps~~ advanced almost without interruption and by the end of the day reached the line Popovka - Barsuki; the 6th. Guards Rifle Corps, exploiting the success of the previous day, attacked Boguchar.

The enemy threw tanks and lorried infantry into the area of Boguchar, putting up a stubborn defence, frequently counter-attacking. Despite this, the formations of the 6th. Guards Rifle Corps moved forward with determination and in the middle of the day,

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on the right flank, captured Vervekovka and Lofitskoye and attacked the town of Boguchar.

After forcing the river Bogucharka the tank corps gained operational freedom. Particularly successful was the 25th. Tank Corps which towards the end of the day reached the area of Setrakovskiy having moved over 70 km in one day. The 24th. Tank Corps, having advanced for more than 20 km, reached the area Dmitrovka.

Simultaneously with the breakthrough of the enemy defences in the direction of the main thrust, the rifle formations were able to exploit their success. Towards the end of the third day the 38th. Guards Rifle Division occupied Krasnogorovka, Abrosimovo, and Monastyrshchina. The 153rd. Rifle Division captured Mrykhy, Meshchepyakov, Batal'shchikov, Biryokov, G'romtvenskiy, and Tikhonovskiy.

The frontal attack by our Rifle formations and the attack by our tank units from the flank and rear completely demoralized the Italian units who started a disorganized retreat in a southerly and south-westerly direction.

The 298th. German Division defended Boguchar with determination but through the uninterrupted fighting of the 18th. of December it had suffered serious losses and in the night from the 18th. to the 19th. of December it started to withdraw towards the south. During the night units of the 6th. Guards Rifle Division occupied Boguchar and Poltovka.

Thus, in three days, the 1st. Guards Army destroyed, after hard fighting, an important sector of the enemy's defended position and completely eliminated the Italian and German forces in the Bogucharsk sector. In order to avoid encirclement all the other sectors of the German Army's front had to be withdrawn. By the end of the third day our troops had penetrated the enemy's defences on the right flank to a depth of 35 km, and in the center to over 20 km. In that time the 24th. Tank Corps made a fighting advance of 40 km, and the 25th. Tank Corps close to 90km.

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THE THRUST OF THE THIRD GUARDS ARMY TO KRUSHIL The attack of the 3rd. Guards Army began at the same time as that of the 1st. Guards Army. The artillery preparation because of the heavy fog was not completely successful, as it had ~~not~~ been in the sector of the 1st. Guards Army. In addition, on the right flank of the army (in the sector of the 197th. Rifle Division), because of poor visibility the artillery preparation lasted for fifty minutes only instead of the hour and a half which had been planned. As a result, many of the five positions were not damaged at all. When the units of the 14th. Rifle Corps started their attack in the direction of the main thrust and they were met by strong artillery ~~fire~~ mortar fire from the forward defended line as well as from the rear areas. They received particularly heavy fire from heights 168.0, 157.2, and 155.6, which showed themselves to be strongly defended areas, as well as from the settled localities Astakov, Sviridov, and Irasnokutsk. The battle during the day was bitter and ended in the direction of the main thrust without our troops having made appreciable progress in the direction of Astakov, and Dulenskiy, and towards the north-eastern defences of Sviridov. Height 168.0, P.T.F., height 155.6, remained occupied by the enemy.

The failure of the infantry attack necessitated the commitment of the echelon which was to have exploited the success (1st. Guards Mechanized Corps).

The attack on the right flank of the army proceeded more favorably. Towards the end of the day units of the 197th. Rifle Division had cleared the enemy completely from Verkh. Kaliniisk and had entrenched on the northern edge of heights 204.2, 215.0, and on the southern edge of Verkh. Kaliniisk. (Sketch 3).

Already on the first day it became apparent that insufficient provision for POL and ammunition had been made. This hampered the free movement of the tanks and also because there had not been enough ammunition to subdue the enemy's system of fire positions. The Army Commander demanded from the troops that they correct the

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mistakes made on the first day of the battle and during the night fresh supplies of fuel and ammunition were brought up so that ^{on} the morning of the 17th. a new attack could be mounted to fulfil the tasks set for the previous day. 30 minutes of artillery preparation was to start the attack (from 07.45 to 08.15 hours).

On the morning of the 17th. of December more or less bitter fights developed in the direction of the main thrust.

Units of the 294th. and 62nd. (German) Infantry Divisions were able to bring up their reserves and the 14th. Rifle Corps was unable until the middle of the day, to break through the enemy's defences.

For this reason the Army Commander decided not to wait until the rifle formations were able to break through the defences but to commit the 1st. Guards Mechanized Corps, with the objective of breaking through the enemy defences and to exploit success in a south-westerly direction.

At 1300 hours the 1st. Guards Mechanized Corps entered the battle along the boundary (excluding height 98.8, and (excluding) Maslitskiy. Despite determined defence, units of the Corps were able to break into the forwards defended area and, exploiting success, were beginning to move forward quickly. As a result of the battle in the second half of the day and during the night to the 18th. of December the Corps occupied Astaklov and Il'in. Part of the Corps' force was fighting for Kon'kov and Bokovskaya at last light on the 18th. of December.

The 14th. Guards Rifle Division, taking advantage of the success of the 1st. Guards Mechanized Corps, towards the end of the 17th. of December, dislodged the enemy from Dulensk. The 159th. and 203rd. Rifle Divisions fought for Sviridov and Krasnokutskaya. The situation on the army's flanks, in the sectors of the 197th. and 50th. Guards Rifle Divisions, remained unchanged.

On the 18th. of December, the 1st. Guards Mechanized Corps and units of the 14th. Rifle Corps continued their advance and by the end of the day seized Kon'kov, Bokovskaya, and Star.Zemtsov. The

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last of the enemy's defended lines had been penetrated. During the same day units of the 1st. Guards Mechanized Corps, and of the 266th Rifle Division, advancing to Krushiliv from the south, and not meeting any serious opposition, occupied Krivoshlykov, Belavin, and Pislogubov. The left flanking division of the army, fulfilling its previous assignment continued the fight along the line of the river Khiz.

Thus, by the end of the third day of the attack, the 3rd. Guards Army had succeeded in advancing 15 to 20 km in the direction of the main thrust, and had accomplished a breakthrough of the enemy's defence line. The troops started the pursuit of the withdrawing units of the 294th. and 62nd. German and of the 7th. and 11th. Romanian Divisions, trying to achieve their encirclement and destruction in the area of Krushilin.

THE ACTION ON THE FRONT OF THE 5TH. TANK ARMY Encountering determined resistance on their front, the troops of the 5th. Tank Army made only insignificant inroads into the enemy defences in the three days from the 16th. to the 18th. of December. Regardless of the lack of progress, the army by its determined activity, not only tied the enemy's forces down, but also inflicted heavy losses in men and material.

THE ATTACK ON THE LEFT WING OF THE VORONEZH FRONT (Sketch 1). The Voronezh front had received the assignment to support the December operation of the south-western front. For this purpose the Commander of the Voronezh front had formed a striking force from components of the 6th. Army which was to operate in close cooperation with the 1st. Guards Army of the south-western front and to protect its flank from any counter-attack from the west.

The attack of the 6th. Army started at the same time as that of the troops of the south-western front. Utilizing a bridgehead on the right shore of the Don, the main forces of the army, under artillery cover, crossed to the other shore, broke through the forward line of defence, and started to push ahead.

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Despite the determined resistance by the Italians, and many counterattacks, supported by tanks and aircraft, the following places were occupied by the units of the army by 12 o'clock: the 15th. Rifle Corps - heights 191.1, 162.3, Deresovka and 204.1; the 127th. Rifle Division - the eastern outskirts of Nov. Kalitva and heights 197.1, 199.5.

The penetration of the enemy defences to a depth of 2-3 km presented the opportunity to introduce the echelon which was to exploit the success. Only the 17th. Tank Corps, operating in the Osetrov sector, was unable to exploit success because they were being held up at height 197.0.

The situation was made more difficult because the main tank force of the army (the 82nd. and 212th. Tank Regiments as well as the 515th. Tank Brigade) was also in the Osetrov sector and could not come to the support of the army's main striking force.

During the night the troops dug themselves in and prepared themselves to assume the attack in the morning of the 17th. of December.

Meanwhile the 17th. Tank Corps with its motorized brigade, together with the motorized brigade of the 25th. Tank Corps, captured Pashno-Orekov, and at first light moved to the breakthrough and the infantry support tanks followed them into battle. By the morning of the 17th. of December the crossing to the right shore of the Don of the divisional artilleries and of the anti-tank artillery regiments had been completed.

The Italians and Germans, operating from a strongly fortified position in the rear along the boundary Ivanovka, Tsapkovo, Orobinskiy, Dubovikovka, continued to offer stiff resistance, particularly in the sector Nov. Kalitva, Ivanovka. By the end of the day the divisions of the first echelon occupied the defended points Tsapkovo and Orobinskiy. The 17th. Tank Corps conquered Dubovikovka.

On the 18th. of December the army continued its successful advance in the direction of the main thrust. The 17th. Tank Corps, after a fierce fight, entered Pisarevka and, leaving parts of the

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motorized rifle brigade as a holding force, advanced with one brigade to Taly, where in the evening they became involved in a bitter battle which lasted all night. With the remaining troops the corps advanced energetically in the direction of Antemirovits, and at 0030 hours on the 19th. of December it reached Ramarevka.

Within a period of 3 days, the defences of the 5th. Italian Division had been destroyed, and units of the 6th. Army, having advanced 20-25 km. had gained operational freedom. Within the same period the 17th. Tank Corps had already reached a depth of 45km. Thus the 6th. army had successfully completed its assignment to support from the west the striking force of the South-Western Front. From 10 o'clock on the 19th. of December the 6th. army was placed under command of the South-Western Front.

SUMMARY OF THE FIRST PHASE OF THE OPERATION

As the result of three days' fighting by the troops of the southwestern and Voronezh fronts, the strongly fortified defences of the enemy had been penetrated in the direction of the main thrust. The Italian, Rumanian, and German troops started a disorderly retreat in a southerly and south-westerly direction. The enemy had suffered tremendous losses. During these days over seventeen thousand casualties were inflicted on the enemy, and over four thousand prisoners as well as much booty was taken.

By the end of the 18th. of December the breakthrough in the direction of Boguchar was about 60km deep and in the direction of Bokovsk 20 km. The depth of penetration by our troops on the right flank was about 10 km and in the center about 15km.

The success of the operation can be ascribed to the careful preparation, the surprise of the attack, and the concentration of forces on the broken-through sectors. Also to be noted the realistic commanding of the troops and the clear designation of the aim, quick stock-taking of the deficiencies and the organization of the breakthrough in the first day, the coordination of the activities

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of the various arms and their clever manoeuvre on the field of battle.

The speed of advance during the first day was reduced particularly by the lack of success of the infantry and the fact that the tanks were held up in the Osetrov sector. These two delays gave the enemy the opportunity to bring up reserves and artillery into the sectors of the breakthrough, which made the task of the attacking forces more difficult in the second and third day of the operation.

The difficult and continued battle on the front of the 3rd. Guards and 5th. Tank Army, can be explained by the fact that in front of the left wing of the south-western front the majority of the opposing forces consisted of Germans. One of the most important tasks of this group was to prevent the advance of the 3rd. Guards Army so that it could not support the Tormos and Potelnikov battle groups which were trying to encircle Paulus' forces behind Stalinograd.

The thrusts by the Tank Corps to Tatsinsk and Morozovsk and the successful action against the Krazhil group of the enemy, disrupted the plans of the German command.

THE ACTION IN THE OPERATIONAL DEPTH OF THE DEFENCE AND

PURSUIT OF THE ENEMY

As a result of the forward defended area having been broken through in the direction of Boguchar and Bolovsk and of the fact that a large number of the enemy formations had been destroyed, the retreat by the Italian, Rumanian and German forces began. Favorable conditions for encircling strikes developed. The German command, in an effort to halt our successful advance, started to bring up reserves from the rear as well as from neighboring fronts. Intensive rail movement on the line from Rossozh to the south and on the lines Likhaya - Millerovo and Likhaya - Morozovskiy developed. New units were identified in front of the 6th. and 1st. Guards armies. The third Italian Alpini Division, the 385th., 387th. German infantry divisions as well as the 27th. German Tank Division. The

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206th. German infantry Division had been despatched in the direction of Bokovsk, and in the direction of Chernishkov concentration of new troops was noticed. But all these efforts by the enemy failed to stop our further advance.

Taking this into account, the Commander of the South-Western Front, in a special order explained to the troops the necessity of continuing the determined pursuit in order to destroy the enemy completely. The formation commanders were instructed not to get involved in lengthy battles for individual defended points, but to bypass these and to leave behind encircling forces. The troops were instructed that they should fight continuously and should not break off the battle during the nights.

The order required from the mobile forces and from the reinforced forward elements that they capture the enemy's avenues of withdrawal. The tank and mechanized formations received therefore a particularly important assignment. They were to try to penetrate deep into the rear areas, capture the more important rail junctions, to cut communications, to destroy or stop the approaching enemy reserves, and to assist the rifle formations of the Front in the complete destruction of all hostile forces in the area of the middle Don.

The pursuit of the main forces of the 8th. Italian Army and their destruction (Sketch 3).

On the 19th. of December, the 1st. Guards Army pursuing the retreating enemy reached the line Byk, Chikun, Poltava, D'yachenkovo. Its forward elements contained mobile forces on trucks, reinforced by tanks, anti-tank guns, and 76 mm guns.

The tank Corps, moving forward determinedly, destroyed infantry and cut deep into the rear of the enemy. During the 19th. of December the 24th. Tank Corps approached the area of the Man'kov - Mal'tyenskaya, and having their forward elements moving to Sheptukhovka and Ludinovka. The 25th. Tank Corps on the 19th. of December occupied Setrakovskiy.

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The 18th. Tank Corps, operating in close cooperation with units of the 1st. Guards Army, pursuing the enemy, advanced to Verkhnyakoskiy and Moshov, having been given the immediate task, together with the 153rd. Rifle Division, to capture the latter.

During this time the Italian and German forces from the area of Boguchar started to withdraw to the south. At the same time the Italian divisions withdrew from the river Don in the sector Podkolonovo to Migulinskaya in a south-westerly direction.

Considering these favorable circumstances the Front Commander ordered the 1st. Guards Army to encircle and destroy the enemy in the area Boguchar Migulinsk. In order to fulfill this assignment the Army Commander decided to continue the pursuit of the enemy with the 4th. Guards Rifle Corps in the general direction of Millerovo, and to use the 6th. Guards Corps, the 18th. Tank Corps, and the 153rd. Rifle Division for the encirclement.

The 24th. and 25th. Tank Corps were given the assignment to pursue the enemy in their previous direction and to advance to the area Tatsinskaya and Porozobskiy as quickly as possible.

The Raid on Tatsinsk by the 24th. Tank Corps

The 24th. Tank Corps, after breaking enemy resistance, reached the area Bagtevo by the 20th. of December. On the 22nd. of December the corps had already conquered Bol'shinka, and, during the morning of the 23rd. of December, after a bitter fight, captured Skosyrsk. At 2 o'clock, on the 24th. of December, units of the corps emerged from Skosyrsk and by 6 o'clock on the 24th. had taken up their departure positions on the approaches to Tatsinsk.

At 1730 hours after a salvo by the rocket launching units of the Tank Corps, from three sides, simultaneously with all three brigades, the attack started. By 0800 hours the railway and highway south-east of Tatsinsk were cut. At 0900 hours, units of the corps, broke into the southern airdrome, destroying the panic-stricken flying and technical personnel. At 1100 hours the railroad station was captured where a transport with 50 aircraft and a transport of

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POI was destroyed by our troops.

The Germans, trying to recapture the lost areas, threw tanks with tank-riding submachine gunners into the battle. All these attacks were repulsed and by 1700 hours the town was completely in our hands ~~Applied~~ and the Tank Corps organized all-around defence in order to be able to hold it until the arrival of our rifle units.

The advance by the 24th. Tank Corps to Tatsinsk had great operational importance. The Corps cut the only railway which supplied the German troops, concentrating in the area of Tormos as well as on the German evacuation route westward from that area.

The Strike of the 25th. Tank Corps on the Rear Installations of the Enemy

The 25th. Tank Corps pushed forward energetically during this time as well. Destroying the hostile groups which it had met along its route, the Corps by 1900 hours on the 19th. of December broke into Lashar, completely destroying the entire garrison of about 1000 men.

During the night 20/21 December the Corps started to move again in the direction of Morozovsk. German defensive efforts increased. During the 21st. of December units of the Corps had to wage continuous battle in the areas Fomino-Svechinko, Pervomaysk, Tverdokhlebo, and Gusarovskiy.

During the ^{22nd.} ~~night~~ to the 24th. of December, units of the Corps fought with strong German detachments and reserves which had been brought up from Morozovsk. As the result of the developing conditions, the 25th. Tank Corps temporarily assumed the defensive until the arrival of the rifle units.

The action by the 25th. Tank Corps in the enemy's rear was of great help to the successful advance of the 1st. and 3rd. Guards Armies.

The encirclement and Liquidation of the Boguchar-Migulinsk Enemy Grouping

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While the 24th. and 25th. Tank Corps, pursuing the enemy, operated in its rear in the area Tatsinsk and Morozovsk, the rifle formation was following immediately behind the Tank Corps pursuing the retreating enemy day and night without letup.

The 4th. Guards Rifle Corps in the middle of the 21st. of December, reached the line Nove-Markovka, Kan'kov-alitvensk, having its forward elements on the approaches to Chertkov and Sheptukhov.

The 6th. Guards Rifle Corps, after destroying the enemy in the area of Radchensk, toward the end of the 20th. of December, reached the area Sokhrannaya, Zherebtsovskiy, Khlebnyy, Popovka, and towards the end of the next day engaged the line Setraovskyy, Arbusovka, Pozdnyakov, Makarov.

The 153rd. Rifle Division, together with two brigades of the 18th. Tank Corps, occupied Meshkov on the 20th. of December, with part of its forces moving in a westerly direction, made contact with units of the 6th. Guards Rifle Corps. Thus the complete encirclement of the main force of the Boguchar-Migulinsk group of about twenty thousand enemy was accomplished.

The 35th. Guards Rifle Division had been brought up from the reserve and placed in support of the 6th. Guards Corps, and by the end of the 21st. of December had dug in along the line Mal.Lofovka, Blakseyevo-Lazovka with the assignment of preventing the escape of separate enemy groups in a south-westerly direction. The battle for the final annihilation of the encircled enemy was begun. Suffering heavy losses from our artillery fire and seeing the hopelessness of their situation, large groups of Italian soldiers surrendered.

As the result of the battles of the 21st. and 22nd. of December alone, units of the 1st. Guards Army, taking part in the encirclement, took over fourteen thousand enemy soldiers and officer prisoners. By the 23rd. of December the greater part of the encircled troops was either destroyed or taken prisoner.

Only the remnants of the ss, of the 298th. German Infantry Division, and of the Italian Blackshirts, encircled from all sides,

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continued their stubborn resistance. Having organized all-around defence, this group of about 6000 men, several times, on the 23rd. of December, tried to break out in a south-westerly direction. By 6 o'clock on the 24th. of December, units of the 6th. Guards Corps, completely annihilated the remaining Italian and German troops.

Thus the main force of the Italian and German force which was located opposite the 1st. Guards Army, had been destroyed, and only small units were able to withdraw in a westerly or south-westerly direction.

The Pursuit and the Advance of the Formations of the 1st. Guards Army to the Boundary for Consolidation

During the time that the 6th. Guards Rifle Corps waged battle with the encircled enemy in the area of Arbuzovka, the 4th. Guards Rifle Corps continued the pursuit of the enemy.

Particularly fierce fighting took place for the strongly fortified sector Gartmashevka and Chertovo. Encircling the enemy by the 22nd. of December, the corps with its main force advanced by the 24th. of December to the line Rizkoye, Mikhaylovo-Aleksandrova.

Units of the 6th. Guards Rifle Corps, after liquidating the encircled enemy, on the 27th. of December, advanced to the area of Illerovo and joined the battle for this town.

The 18th. Tank Corps, after completion of the encirclement of the enemy in the area of Arbuzovka, received the assignment to advance to the area Verkh.Chirskiy and to cut the enemy's route of withdrawal from Veshensk. Quickly moving in an easterly direction, units of the corps reached Verkh. Chirskiy by 2 o'clock on the 22nd. of December, where a bitter fight developed. The defenders which consisted of the 2nd. Italian Infantry Division were destroyed in an eight-hour battle. In Verkh.Chirskiy the Tank Corps alone took 2500 prisoners.

Operating in the area Verkh.Chirskiy and Il'ichevka, the 18th. Tank Corps cut all the roads by which the enemy could have withdrawn.

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By morning of the 24th. of December the Corps reached the area of Illerovo.

By reaching the boundary Krizkoye-Millerovo, the 1st. Guards Army completed the second phase of the operation. Despite the difficulties created by the wintry conditions and despite the lack of transport and the ever-lengthening lines of communications, the infantry advanced within six days a distance of 100 to 120 km, an average speed of 16 to 20 km per day.

The Development of the Attack of the 3rd. Guards Army

On the 19th. of December, the 197th. Rifle Division, advancing from Kruzhile from the north, met in that area elements of the 14th. Rifle and of the 1st. Mechanized Corps, advancing on Kruzhile from the south. Thus towards the end of the fourth day of the operation, the army, by occupying the area of Kruzhile, completed its first assignment.

The enemy succeeded, during the night of the 18th. to the 19th. of December in withdrawing considerable portions of his troops from the Kruzhile sector and in fortifying himself on the southern shore of the river Chir. The main body of the Italian and Rumanian forces, in the meantime, continued their withdrawal in a southerly and south-westerly direction.

The Front Commander, concerned about the exploitation of the hostile activities on the front of the 3rd. Guards Army, in his discussions on the 19th. of December, ordered the army commander to swing his main force in a southerly direction and to pursue, without letup, the withdrawing enemy. At the same time, it was demanded of the 3rd. Guards Army that they move into the area of Morozovskaya as a first priority and together with the 24th. and 25th. Tank Corps to deliver a thrust at the rear of the Tormosk grouping of the enemy. The latter, in connection with the forward movement of Mannstein's group from the area of Kotelnikov in a north-westerly direction, posed a serious threat to the left flank of the Front.

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Conforming to the orders of the Commander of the Front, the Army Commander decided to advance with his main forces in the general direction of Vorozovsk and by the end of the 20th. of December to reach a line : Sovkhoz "Red Dawn", Ponomarev, Nozh.Solinsk, while dispatching the 22nd. Motorized Rifle Brigade in the direction of Nov.Astakhov-Astakhovsk.

The 1st. Guards Mechanized Corps was dispatched to Vorozovsk with the task of occupying this point and to be prepared, in cooperation with the 24th. and 25th. Corps to deliver a thrust into the rear of the Vormosk group of the enemy.

The Commander of the 1st. Guards Mechanized Corps, preparing with his main force to advance from the area of Marginsk towards the south, during the night of the 19th./20th. of December, sent his 17th. Tank Regiment from Astakov to the Sovkhoz "Red Dawn" with the assignment of advancing on the lines of communication of the withdrawing enemy. This regiment, as a result of a forced night march, cut the withdrawal routes of the enemy in the area of the Sovkhoz "Red Dawn" and after the battle dispersed a large group of the enemy withdrawing from Kruzhile, destroying in the course of battle about ten thousand officers and men, which helped considerably in the successful pursuit of the enemy on the right flank of the army.

The 1st. Brigade of the 1st. Guards Mechanized Corps captured Popovka towards the end of the first day destroying or taking prisoner over 2000 men; the third Brigade continued the movement in the direction of Grekov; the 2nd. Brigade continued the battle in the area of Bokovsk.

Taking advantage of the success achieved by the Mechanized Corps the right-flanking Rifle Divisions were able to advance quickly, and towards the end of the day reached the area of Sovkhoz "Krasnaya Marya" and Ponomarev.

The Divisions which were operating in the direction of Bokovsk with the 3rd.. Brigade of the Mechanized Corps, after three days of

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bitter fighting captured Mon'kov, Evsant'yevskiy, and Sviridov, and continued their movement in a south-westerly direction.

In the remaining sector of the left flank of the army there was little change. The German and Rumanian forces continued their stubborn defence of their occupied positions, repulsing all the attempts of the 203rd. and 50th. Guards Rifle Divisions to advance in a westerly direction.

During the 21st. of December, and in the following days, the attack in the central sector and on the right flank of the army was much more successful than on the left. A favorable condition for an attack on the rear of the Chernishevsk enemy position developed.

Complying with the order of the Front Commander, the army commander gave this assignment to the 22nd. Motorized Rifle Brigade and two rifle divisions which were advancing in the central sector. The right flanking divisions were to reach the boundary Nikol'skaya, Chinka, Pokrovka, by the morning of the 24th. of December, to encircle themselves there, and to support from the west the attack of the remaining formations of the army.

Units of the 1st. Guards Mechanized Corps, after a bitter fight with the 306th. German Infantry Division south of Grskov, overtook the division, and pursuing in a southerly direction, by the morning of the 23rd. of December, occupied the boundary Stepano - Sivomorsk. By the evening of the same day the leading units of the Corps reached the area Milyutinskaya.

The 22nd. Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade, after fulfilling its task together with other units of the army, of encircling the enemy group in Chernishevsk, reached the area of Pervomaysk by the 23rd. of December and its leading elements engaged Luznetsov. The 266th. Division, by the same time, occupied the settlements Platov, Talakhov, Talovka, Dmitriyevskiy. The encirclement was thus accomplished.

The right flanking divisions started to advance on the 20th. of December from the line Popovka, Shalayevsk, Ponomarev, in the

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direction ashar and Rossosh! Bypassing the centers of enemy resistance, the divisions reached the eastern shore of the river Alitva by the end of the 24th. of December, and occupied Nilol'skaya, Efremovc-Stepanovka, Il'yinka, Pokrovka, where they started to fortify themselves along their forward boundary.

On the 24th. of December the situation changed. The enemy, realizing that his position in Chernishevsk was untenable, started to withdraw in order to avoid encirclement. At the same time, he tried to stem, with all his available forces, the advance by the 12nd. Motorized Rifle Brigade and the 266th. Rifle Division into his rear. Relentlessly pursuing the withdrawing enemy, the left-flanking formations occupied Rubashkin, Petrovskiy, and Paramonov during the second half of the day, and together with the 346th. Division of the 5th. Tank Army, Chernishevsk.

Reports indicated that the enemy was concentrating on the line Skosyrskaya - Chernyshevsk, and was preparing to halt the further advance of our troops on the line of the river Bystraya. The 1st. Guards Mechanized Corps, which had been left behind to hold the line of the river Gnilaya, was now ordered to outflank the enemy which was holding the area Milyutinsk, and by the 25th. of December, seize Prozovsk.

On the morning of the 25th. of December, after re-grouping, the 1st. Guards Mechanized Corps started to attack, dislodged the enemy from his defences, from the move cleared the settlements Milyutinsk and Yudin, and, exploiting success, reached with its main forces the boundary Yuripin, Nagornaya, Mikhaylovka.

The 266th. and the 203rd. Rifle Divisions, having become separated from the corps by a considerable distance, moved in the direction of Skosyrsk in forced marches. Meanwhile, the left-flanking divisions, continuing the pursuit of the remnants of the 14th. Rumanian Division, on the 25th. of December reached the line Sl.Selivanovskaya, Levatyty, Ust'-Gryaznovskiy, and by the end of the 26th. of December reached the river Gnilaya.

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On the 26th. of December and the following days the 1st. Guards Mechanized Corps was engaged in particularly fierce fighting along their front. The left-flanking divisions continued their advance and by the 27th. of December reached the line Skosyrsk, Prishib. Further advance was impossible because of the well-organized enemy defences.

Thus the second phase of the operation - the pursuit of the withdrawing enemy on the front of the 3rd. Guards Army - was completed by the 25th. to the 27th. of December. The enemy, by bringing up reserves, had been able to entrench himself on the far shore of the river Bystraya, and was able to halt temporarily the advance of our troops.

During the period from the 19th. to the 26th. of December, units on the right flank and in the central sector had advanced between 100 to 120 km, and on the left flank between 80 and 90 km. The speed of the movement of the 1st. Guards Mechanized Corps was somewhat higher and averaged 20 km per day.

The Action on the Flanks of the Front

On the front's right wing the troops of the 6th. army continued their assignment of the 19th. of December. On that day the 127th. Division, after bitter fighting, seized Nov. Malitva where much booty and many prisoners were taken.

The 17th. Tank Corps advanced with determination and by the morning of the 19th. of December its tank brigades reached Kantemirovka, and broke into the town after a twelve-hour battle. During the battle for Kantemirovka the corps destroyed over 1000 Italian officers and men and took over 1500 prisoners, and besides, much booty was taken.

By reaching the area of Kantemirovka, the corps assisted considerably the advance of the 6th. army and covered the right flank of the 1st. Guards Army of the south-western front from a counter attack from the west. At the same time, important communications were cut in the enemy's rear, and as well as his closest railway, the line Rossosh'-Millerovo.

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After handing over the Antemirovka area to the rifle units, the 17th. Tank Corps advanced to the south. It occupied Boloshino on the 22nd. of December, and on the 25th. of December, with its main forces, started to blockade Millerovo from the west. It thus had completed its assignment.

Starting with the 21st. of December the battle took on a much more determined character. The German command tried not only to stop the advance but also to mount a counter-attack in the direction of Antemirovka and Lisarevka. For that purpose fresh units were brought in by him. By strong counter-attacks the enemy was able to stop our advance of the 127th. Rifle Division on the line Nov. alitva - Lisarevka.

In the direction of the main thrust units of the 15th. Rifle Corps, breaching the resistance of the remnants of the 15th. Italian Division and of the fresh troops which had been moved up, on the 30th. of December reached the line Serobabin, Las'kovka, Markovka. Here the 6th. army assumed the defence, covering from the west the rear and rear of the 1st. Guards Army.

On the left wing of the front, the 5th. Tank Army, meeting stubborn resistance, waged a bitter battle in the tactical zone of the enemy's defences. This can be explained by the fact that the German Command/ continued to bring forward reserves from the rear and to reinforce the thrust in the direction of Chernishovsk and Formos.

Summary of the Second Phase of the Operation

The second phase of the operation encompassed the 25th. to the 30th. of December. During that time the troops of the 6th., the 1st. Guards Army, and the right-flanking formations of the 3rd. Guards Army generally reached their planned objectives and continued the battle while consolidating this position. Parts of the 1st. Guards Army continued the battle for the destruction of the encircled enemy groups in the area Gartmashevka and Chertkovo.

On the left flank of the 3rd. Guards Army and on the right

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Blank of the 5th. Tank Army a relentless battle with the newly brought-up reserves continued.

The significant success of the troops of the south-western front had been achieved under difficult winter conditions, with a very extended system of communications and an insufficient supply of motor transport. All this did not have the effect of reducing the tempo of the pursuit but gave a special character to the action of the troops and caused a number of additional difficulties.

The main points were these:

1. The separation of the artillery from the advancing troops on account of the lack of gasoline. In this connection, artillery support of the advancing troops had to be provided from horse-drawn artillery and the organic mortar subunits of the formations. The isolation of the artillery in the advancing units during the battle of the operational depth of the enemy defence zone weakened the action of the tank and rifle formations, reduced their speed and resulted in considerable losses of men and material. Of great assistance, particularly with the destruction of the defended localities and the liquidation of the encircled enemy groups, were the horse-drawn gunners.

2. The separation from the motorized and mobile forces forced the frequent utilization of tank formations in a holding role and the arrival of infantry units. This led to the dispersion of the forces of the tank corps over a wide front as well as the safeguarding of the rear, considerably reduced their manoeuvrability, weakened their striking force and reduced the speed of pursuit.

The separation of the infantry from the tanks forced independent action of the latter in the depth of the enemy's defence and made the task of both (tanks and infantry) more difficult. As a result of this many defended points and fortified lines had to be fought for twice, first with tanks and then with infantry.

3. Even though our reconnaissance - aerial, ground, and through agents - was able, during the preparation of the attack, to give

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an accurate picture of the enemy's defensive position and of his strength, during the course of the battle it often failed to supply our command with the necessary information concerning the enemy. Our troops frequently encountered unexpectedly large and small enemy groups, became involved in battle with them without knowing their strength and dispositions. As a result of this our troops often fought extended battles with rearguards while the enemy's main force escaped from encirclement and withdrew to the next suitable natural boundary.

4. Hostile air power also had a considerable influence on the mobility and manoeuvrability of our tank and mechanized formations because of lack of air cover by our air force and insufficient anti-aircraft defence.

5. The great distance separating army headquarters from the fighting troops, with insufficient communications, made the operational direction of the troops difficult. Army headquarters were not always able to receive situation reports from the troops and to give orders which became necessary as a result of the changing situation.

6. The work of the rear services was also made extremely difficult because of the continuously lengthening distances. The task of supplying the troops with POL, ammunition, and food, grew into a problem of the first magnitude on which the outcome of the first operation depended. Despite the reinforcement of the command and the officers of the rear service, the troops experienced a shortage of battle supplies and POL. This had a significant influence on the speed of advance.

All the above mentioned difficulties and shortages which the troops of the south-western front experienced during the pursuit limited the mobility and manoeuvrability of the units and did not allow the fulfillment of the planned speed of advance.

This gave the enemy the opportunity to withdraw parts of his troops. Besides, in the Morozovsk sector the enemy was able to move up new units from other sectors of the front and with their aid

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ing in on the northern shore of the river Bystraya, and retain under its control not only the station Tatsinskaya but also a line of communication for its Tormosinsk group - the railroad from Oblivskaya to Miklaya.

A new task was set for the troops of the front, and particularly the troops of the 3rd. Guards Army, to destroy the determined enemy defence along the river Bystraya in order to assure the destruction of the Morozovsk - Tormosk group.

The battle for this assignment constituted the third phase of the operation.

Lack of space prevents even a short description of the battle in the concluding phase of the operation of the south-western front.

It must only be noted that in the concluding phase of the operation, troops of the south-western front concluded the assignment set for them. The Tormosk grouping of the enemy was liquidated. The joint action of the south-western and Stalingrad fronts resulted in the complete encirclement of the hostile forces around Stalingrad. The distance between the German forces in Stalingrad and the German forces remained at over 200 km and the German forces were forced to withdraw behind the river Northern Donets under the blows of the troops.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The results of the December operation of the south-western front - successes in men and equipment were inflicted on the enemy and he was forced to withdraw behind the river Northern Donets in order to avoid a second major encirclement.

The success of the troops of the south-western front can be ascribed to the following:

1. The high command of the Red Army, despite the difficult circumstances existing in the south in the second half of 1942 managed to maintain a strategic reserve and to collect enough material for the conduct of an attack on a broad front.

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2. Although the command of the south-western front did not have an overwhelming majority over the German forces, it managed to achieve superiority in the direction of the main thrust, to break through a strongly fortified defended zone and to exploit success in the operational depth.

3. The command of the front managed to keep the place and direction of the main thrust a secret. The concentration under cover, the clever re-grouping, and active reconnaissance in secondary directions completely disorientated the enemy. Even though the German command knew of the preparations for an attack, its strength and sweep was strikingly unexpected by them.

4. The success of the operation bore out the correctness of the choice of direction (the presence of Italian troops at the right flank and the hasty preparation of the defense on the left flank) and the timing of the attack (the enemy's whole attention was directed to the assistance of the encircled troops in Stalingrad).

5. During the planning of the operation considerable attention was directed to insure the protection of the flanks of the assaulting forces of the front. As the result of this all the attempts of the enemy to break through from the west failed. The right-flanking force repulsed all enemy attacks and was able to retain control of the occupied area, and was thus able to support the 1st. Guards Army in fulfillment of its task. This also applied to the 5th. Tank Army which held considerable forces on its front.

6. Of particular importance to the outcome of the operation was the method used. The concentric capture of separate enemy groups by consecutive crushing blows on the enemy led to his dispersion and encirclement and isolation of his units and formations. The thrusts delivered at the rear areas and at the enemy's lines of communications demoralized the troops, made communication between them impossible, and prevented the transmission of orders, and denied him the opportunity to organize resistance and made possible his destruction in small segments.

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7. The troops of the south-western front never let the initiative slip from their hands. This was achieved thanks to their clever action throughout the operation.

8. The rifle units and formations proved themselves as determined fighters who bent all their efforts to the fulfillment of their assignments. As an example of this can serve the outstanding action of the rifle formations of the 1st. Guards Army during the pursuit, encirclement and destruction of the twenty-thousand man enemy group in the area of Arbuzovka.

Despite the fact that the enemy had much more motor transport, he was unable to evacuate his main force, the major part of which was destroyed and either destroyed or taken prisoner.

9. Much of the success of the infantry was due to artillery action. Supporting our pursuing units without interruption, the heavy using horses supported it with fire and wheels. The action of these units rendered priceless support to our advancing troops.

10. The determined pursuit of the enemy by the Tank Corps deserves particular mention, as well as their high manoeuvrability, their shortness and initiative during the battles in the tank battle depth. Finding themselves far away from their support, the tank units seized the enemy's main communications, cutting off the route, and successfully fought against the withdrawing enemy Italian troops. The brilliant raid by the 24th. Tank Corps for capture of Tatsinsk, the clever organization of the defence of that place, the heroic battle while being completely encircled, the well-conducted breakout from the encirclement on the 18th. of December despite the numerical superiority of the enemy, are examples of steadfastness, determination, and skill. The raid of the 17th. Tank Regiment into the enemy's rear area and the destruction by the tankists of a ten-thousand strong group of Italians and Germans in the area of Sovkhoz "Red Dawn", also illustrates the high manoeuvrability, daring, and courage of the tank units. The troops of the Red Army can well learn from the example of the

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tankists of the south-western front.

These are the special reasons for the success of the December advance by the troops of the south-western front.

The December operation by the south-western front lasted 11 days. Despite the winter conditions, and the very extended communications and the difficulties encountered in supplying the groups, the average speed of advance per day for rifle formations was between 10 to 12 km. The speed of movement of the tank units was considerably higher, but, on the whole, they were below the planned figure with the result that the operation lasted longer than expected.

* * *

The experience of the operation of the south-western front makes it possible to draw conclusions concerning the conduct of such an operation.

1. In the breakthrough of a modern defence, even when limited by the number of the attacking forces such a superiority of the attacking force is required which would give the advancing forces the opportunity to bypass the main defended points and give the infantry the opportunity to attack them in order that the enemy can not recover from the shock of being up his reserves.

2. Tank and mechanized troops have shown themselves as the most effective means to exploit success in a modern advancing operation. These forces have to be grouped together in order that they can achieve a stroke of great strength. Their dispersal in the operational task and their diversion to secondary tasks (the holding of seized positions, safeguarding of communications etc.,) leads to a reduction of their speed of advance and prevents tank troops from fulfilling those tasks for which they are designed. From this follows the conclusion that fronts and armies should be equipped with a sufficient number of motorized infantry who can take in on themselves to secure and hold the success of the tank formations.

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Without motorized infantry the tank formations would not have been in a position to exploit fully their capabilities.

3. The success of an advance depends considerably on air support. This gives the troops greater freedom of manoeuvre, which is a decisive factor in modern operations, and protects the ground from unnecessary losses in men and equipment. During the preparation of the operation and during its course, one should try to utilize aviation centralized so that aerial intervention can be directed in the decisive direction and at the decisive moment of the operation.

4. Of all the command problems the most important is the organization of coordination of the action of the troops during an operation.

As experience shows, in the majority of situations in the first phase of the operations, prior to the breakthrough of the enemy's defences, when the headquarters are in location and have well-established communications, when the commanders and their staffs have enough time to discuss problems of coordination, the organization of coordinated action is essential.

In the dynamics of battle, when new tasks arise, when flexible command is required and quick direction of the troops to the more important of the new tasks is necessary, lack of coordination of the troops is often in evidence. This can be explained by insufficient activity of staffs in coordinating the activities of troops during combat in the depth of the enemy's defences and particularly during the time of pursuit. This was also caused by failure to utilize all the available modern means of communications, particularly radio, for the timely transmission of the commander's decisions to the subordinate troops.

5. Flexibility of command and coordination of the action of the troops of a quickly-developing operation requires that the command posts be close to the activities of the troops. The success of coordination of troop action depends to a considerable extent on proper work of the signal service and flexible utilization of the

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available reserves of signal equipment during the course of the battle.

6. Correct accounting for the material requirements and the proper timing of the forward movement of the requirements for one of the other phase of the operation, constitute the main tasks of the planning for the supplying of the troops. Account has also to be taken of the available means of transportation, so that timely delivery of a sufficient amount of the battle requirements can be delivered. It is obvious that the more difficult the theatre of military action, the longer the road, the more motor transport is required in order to supply the troops with the material necessities for combat.

The motorization of the rear should correspond to the strengthening of the troops with aviation, tanks, artillery, mortar formations and others, in proportion to their increased requirement for battle supplies, etc.

Thus these several general conclusions can be drawn from the experience of the troops of the south-western front in December 1941.

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The experience gathered by the troops of the south-western front during this operation and the lessons learned from it have enriched considerably the knowledge of the Red Army in the field of the operational art and in the tactics of manoeuvre. This rich experience should serve as a stimulus for even more crushing blows on our hated enemy.

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